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NATO Ministers Agree To Hike Arms Budgets

U.S. Warns of Soviet Strength in Europe

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BRUSSELS, Belgium — The United States told "a grim story" of mounting Soviet military power in Europe to its NATO allies yesterday, then won a reaffirmation of the alliance's goal of increasing defense spending by 3 percent a year despite a plea of economic problems by some members.

Since that goal was first adopted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization four years ago, the United States and some other members had fallen short of its annual increases in real, inflation-adjusted terms.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union has continued to increase its military spending by 4 percent or 5 percent a year, according to U.S. intelligence estimates presented to NATO defense ministers yesterday. The estimates were offered at the opening session of the ministers' two-day spring meeting to plan the conventional non-nuclear part of Western defenses.

The special intelligence briefing was intended to impress defense ministers with the extent to which NATO has fallen behind the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact in both conventional and nuclear armaments. Reagan administration officials feel that most Europeans have failed to realize the seriousness of that situation.

Senior U.S. defense officials told reporters later that the briefing had told "a grim story."

After the briefing, U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger told the ministers that people in their countries need to know the truth of the Soviet threat so they will be prepared to make sacrifices for defense. He called on the ministers to speak plainly about the military situation.

Some of the plain speaking took place between Weinberger and West German Defense Minister Hans Apel, according to American and West German officials who were present.

Apel pleaded economic problems in an effort to avoid committing Bonn to the 3 percent figure for this year, but he argued that any lag would be offset by West German de-

fense efforts that have been larger than those of other NATO members over the past decade.

Weinberger insisted the nature of the Soviet threat does not permit any slackening now.

The ministers finally adopted a somewhat vaguely worded reaffirmation of the 3 percent annual goal. U.S. officials took this as progress and the British seemed happy with it, too. But some NATO experts pointed out that the goal has been repeatedly reaffirmed.

The question now is: How many members will reach it? A British expert noted that there had to be flexibility in the formulation of the goal to allow for special problems, while an American official pointed out that the wording allowed for even more than a 3 percent effort.

The spending goal was part of an attempt to give guidance to NATO members on improving logistical and military facility support for defense operations. The backup infrastructure for Western fighting forces has been failing to keep pace with modernization needs. A main reason has been that inflation has eaten up funds for defense support faster than expected.

New plans for improvements cover such things as airfields, naval bases, fuel stores, communications, aerial navigation aids, training installations and headquarters facilities.

U.S. officials said with obvious satisfaction that the ministers' discussion of the guidance on defense support, as one put it, "moved very much in the direction that we think the (intelligence) briefing drives us."

Canadian Admiral Robert Falls, the head of NATO's military committee, told reporters that the briefing showed the alliance has lost ground to the Soviets in the past decade. If the trend continues for another five or more years, he said, the Western ability to deter a Soviet attack will be lost.

Emphasizing the increased Soviet military drive, officials said that since 1970 the Soviet Union has increased by 34 percent the floor space of its military weapons factories. This growing production base is providing increasingly sophisticated weapons, they said.

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